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On the Historical Representation and Literary

Discourse of Philip Roth's Later Novels

论菲利普·罗思后期小说的历史解读与文学话语

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PhD Dissertation

**On the Historical Representation and Literary
Discourse of Philip Roth's Later Novels**

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Abstract in English

Stephen Greenblatt, one of the representatives of New Historicism, puts forward the idea that literary texts are cultural artifacts that can tell people something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written. And they can do so because the literary text is, itself, part of the interplay of discourses, a thread in the dynamic web of social meaning. For new historicism, the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text, which refers to the literary work, and context, which are the historical conditions that produced it, are mutually constitutive: they create each other. Like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and society, literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts (Tyson 627). The New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, which has these as some of its strategic analyzing principles, provides a suitable critical method for the understanding of Philip Roth's later novels. The full disclosure of Roth's insightful depiction of the specific Jewish American history and the American national historical contexts can help to clarify the contents, and themes of his novels.

Philip Roth (1933—) has been regarded as one of the most prominent contemporary Jewish American writers. From the moment that his debut book, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), won him the National Book Award and earned him attacks from the Jewish community, Philip Roth has been among the most influential and consistently controversial writers of our age. Now he is the author of twenty-nine novels, numerous stories, two memoirs and two books of literary criticism. He has won the Pulitzer Prize, the American National Book Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for his fiction. Most of the awards are given to him for his novels published since 1986.

From this year on, Philip Roth's writing has undergone great changes. His fifteen novels published after *The Counterlife* have changed from the early realism and modernism to postmodernism. Historical representation and postmodernist literary discourse permeate these novels, such as *The Counterlife* (1986), *Deception:*

A Novel (1990); *Patrimony* (1991); *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993); *Sabbath's Theatre* (1995); *American Pastoral* (1997); *I Married a Communist* (1998); *The Human Stain* (2000); *The Dying Animal* (2001); *The Plot Against Animal: A Novel* (2004); *Everyman* (2006) and *Exit Ghost* (2007). Profound themes and insightful perceptions situated in the broad historical context have marked his later novels that require a close examination.

The themes Roth has been concerned in the course of his literary career are varied. Nevertheless, Roth is unafraid to mine the same territory over and over again, to deepen his investigations rather than just broaden them. Therefore, there is a good deal of consistency about all of his works. His novels, stories and non-fiction writing all seem to be intricately conjoined. When examined closely, they all point to a relatively historical sense. His novels resonate with the American history from the 1940s to the present and the history's impact on the twentieth-century American life. Therefore, throughout the dissertation, the focus of discussion has been set on the historical representation of Self, social conflicts in the U. S., and the postmodernist literary discourse applied in his later fiction.

Most of the characters in Roth's novels suffer from conflicts of identity when their entire self-image, or even part of it, doesn't match up with the idealized version prompted by the cultural milieu to which they belong. His characters struggle to accommodate contending impulses and desires, to negotiate some kind of inner peace or balance of power, or perhaps just to maintain hostilities at a low destructive level, between the ethnical and social yearnings and the implacable, singular lusts for flesh and its pleasures. His characters always struggle between the measured self and the insatiable self. Henry, Nathan Zuckerman, and Mickey Sabbath all belong to this kind of characters.

Roth tires to define and quest for the hard-to-define multiple selves in contemporary multi-cultural America, whose fates are always defined by history and culture. At the same time these selves are unavoidably driven by desire and death instincts which are especially evident in his latest novels. He depicts different experiences of his characters. Some give in to dismay, becoming misanthropic shells,

appearing round shouldered and burdened, as though in flight from a captured city. Henry in *The Counterlife* is a representative. Some reach out and grab whatever they can get their hands on, whatever momentarily salves their pain. Seymour Levov in *American Pastoral* and Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* all have done such kind of things. Some latch onto an ideology and some embrace nihilism, like Philip Roth the character, Pipik, and other characters' choices in *Operation Shylock*. Some manage to negotiate a tense balance between their opposing desires and drives, finding a way to live in the unsure and devalued universe. Sabbath in *Sabbath's Theatre* and Kepesh in *The Dying Animal* are examples of such kind of experiences.

Roth investigates into the individual in extreme situations, in conflict with powerful and corrupt political systems and the unpredictable historical events. His work speaks of the subtle ways in which the character loses his Self, such as conformity, the ambitious American Dream, banality, blind patriotism and trivialization. He depicts the futile attempts that characters try to cut loose from what binds and inhibits them. Roth in fact questions and scrutinizes the authority which influences the very fates of his characters.

Philip Roth at the same time has been an incisive observer of the American social and political scenes. His greatest accomplishments lie in his ability to probe into the American consciousness and reveal the major conflicts between the society and the individual, between men and women, between the need for security and the desire for adventure, between the myth of American culture and reality. He moves from the specific to the universal, detailing the psychological and sociological peculiarities of life in twentieth century America and linking them ultimately to universal issues of human identity. He delineates the predicament of the individual engaged in a severe struggle against all the internal and external forces of control and points out the universalities of the human condition. He successfully depicts contemporary Americans' American Dream and the disillusionment of the Dream.

Philip Roth has published twenty-nine novels within about fifty years since 1959. His novels move from realism represented by *Goodbye, Columbus*, then to modernism, which *Zuckerman Unbound* is a typical example, and to postmodernism

which is the typical characteristic of the novels published after *The Counterlife*. His new writing style in a way reflects the changes of literary discourses in American literary and critical world. Indeed, postmodernism marks the major characteristics of his sixteen novels published after 1986. In *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, Roth takes up a variety of perspectives on the issues of the state of Israel and the American Jewishness which have been under hot discussion in the world and which have engrossed him during that period. The discussions are in clear opposition to one another and at times along a continuum. Roth applies metafiction techniques and doubleness to present the multiple points of view. In *Sabbath's Theatre*, carnival performance is used. Roth also blurs the links between biography, fiction, and history. Postmodernist depictions of love and death are also one of the main characteristics in his latest novels.

This dissertation, "On the Historical Representation and Literary Discourse of Philip Roth's Later Novels", applies the theories of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism to portray Philip Roth's historical representations of Self's identity and of social conflicts. It also analyses the postmodern literary discourse in his latest novels. It situates Roth's novels in the broad historical context and argues about his portrayal of characters' conflicts between the society and the individual, between men and women, between the need for security and the desire for adventure, between the myth of American culture and the reality.

In Introduction, Roth's important position in the literary world is emphasized. Comments from different Roth scholars are presented in order to show the various aspects critics have been focusing on Roth's novels. Therefore, a fact has been disclosed. Few critics have chosen the six important prize-winning novels as a whole and discuss the outstanding historical representation and postmodernist literary discourse of Roth's works, though they have in one way or another realized its great importance. Besides, the term applied in the dissertation, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, has been analyzed in detail. The structure and the contents of the dissertation are briefly analyzed in Introduction.

Chapter One deals with Roth's two novels published immediately after 1986.

They are *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, both of which are Philip Roth's milestone works. Roth uses metafictional techniques to analyze the fragmented Self and the multiple selves of modern people, especially the fragmented souls that Jewish Americans feel in contemporary American history. Traditional realism is not enough for a contemporary writer to reflect the conflicts which modern man faces with. The complicated contemporary history cannot be presented by just narrating one person's opinion. Metafictional self-reflexiveness and multiple points of view are being applied to present the fragmented Self in the contemporary world.

Chapter Two is to focus on Roth's historical representation of social conflicts in his novels. It also discusses the restrictions of histories on the fates of human beings. The protagonists in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* are concerned with the Jewish sufferings and alienation. These Jewish Americans keep talking about the Holocaust, Diasporism and Zionism. Their lives, including their marriage, their work and even their identity are defined both by the Jewish American history and the history of the state of Israel. However, the protagonists in *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* try to resist and get rid of their ethnic roots. The results waiting for them are the unavoidable tragedy of the loss of their identities. In those two novels, American history after World War II, such as the Vietnam War and the rebellions in the 1960s and the 1970s, and the Political Correctness of the 1980s and 1990s, are the events which keep haunting and influencing the lives of the protagonists.

Chapter Three discusses the postmodern literary discourse of Roth later novels. *The Counterlife* published in 1986 is Roth's most ambitious and meticulously structured novel. It marks the beginning of the peak phase of Roth's literary career. While Roth engages in a sustained examination of the relationship between American and Israeli Jews, he starts to use a lot of evident postmodernist techniques. Postmodernist techniques in the sixteen novels published between 1986 and 2008 are impressive. Metafiction, carnival performances, the hybrid of history, biography and fiction can be traced in those novels. By applying the postmodernist techniques, Roth investigates into the issues of ethnic identity, the state of Israel, the Holocaust,

sexuality, American history, and the human essence.

In Conclusion, Roth's great literary accomplishments are highlighted. His ability to delve into the American consciousness and to reveal its major conflicts are generalized. It is believed that the Jewish and American history that Roth has handled artistically in his novels, his outstanding writing style and his insightful ideas about the essence of human existence have turned out to be a rich literary heritage for readers both in the United States and all over the world.

Key Words: Philip Roth; New Historicism and Cultural Materialism;

Postmodernism

中文提要

新历史主义代表人物斯蒂芬·格林布拉特主张将历史考察带入文学研究，强调文学与文化之间的联系，认为文学是文化的产物，文学隶属于大的文化网络，文学研究应该纳入历史文化语境进行考察。新历史主义也是一种重新解读历史与文学之间关系的历史诗学。它以“文本的历史性”和“历史的文本性”作为其批评实践的主要立足点。“历史的文本性”指人们只有通过源自选择性保护和涂抹的文本才能接近一个物质性的历史存在。而当文本转化为档案时，它们自身也充当后人的阐释媒介。历史在文本中留下自己的镜像，而历史事实只有通过经过权力挑选和抹除而保存下来的文本才能得到表述。“文本的历史性”指的是所有的书写和阅读形式，包括文学文本，非文学文本乃至社会大文本的历史具体性与物质性。文本并非是一个超历史的审美客体，而是特定时代的历史、阶级、权力以及文化语境的产物。文本解读只有在纳入到具体的历史语境之中时才能显现其真正意义。文本是彰显历史意义的存在体，甚至就是构成历史不可缺少的一部分。文本本身就是一种历史文化事件。文本与历史一样都具有诗性的深层结构，都充满想象性与虚构性（汪民安 403）。新历史主义独特的文化策略和广阔的理论视野为解读菲利普·罗思后期小说的深刻主题、内容、复杂的艺术创作手法提供了恰当的批评手段。

菲利普·罗思（1933—）是当代美国多产作家，其丰富的想象力和多重主题一直受到评论界的关注。1959年罗思出版他的成名作品《再见吧，哥伦布》。这部小说在帮助他获得美国国家图书奖的同时，也让他遭到来自美国犹太社区的批评。自此，罗思成为当代美国最有影响力同时也是颇有争议的小说家。现在罗思已经出版小说二十九部，两部回忆录，数篇短篇小说和两本文学批评集。他的小说获得了美国普利策奖、美国国家图书奖、笔会/福克纳小说奖、美国批评家协会小说奖等几乎所有美国小说类重要文学奖项。

他在1986年以后发表的作品备受青睐。究其原因主要是他的创作主题发生了转向，融入了包括20世纪40年代之后的美国历史、当代美国人对美国梦的追寻和梦的破灭、种族身份、以色列问题、性别问题和第二次世界大战屠杀犹太人历史等颇有思考性的历史文化内涵，大大开拓了文学叙事的疆界，并借用后现代派小说家独具特色的叙述手法表达人的自我反思和心灵叩问，旨在探询

人类心灵共性问题。这使许多评论家意识到罗思的小说不仅仅是一些简单的取悦性故事，而是融犹太人身份认同与美国历史文化于一体，正是两者的紧密结合赋予罗思的创作以独特的深层意蕴。历史解读和后现代文学话语涵盖了罗思所有后期小说，例如，《生活逆流》（1986），《欺骗：一部小说》（1990），《遗产》（1991），《夏洛克在行动：一个自白》（1993），《萨巴斯剧院》（1995），《美国牧歌》（1997），《我嫁给了一个共产党》（1998），《人性的污点》（2000），《垂死的动物》（2001），《反美阴谋：一部小说》（2004），《每个人》（2006），和《鬼隐去》（2007）。这些小说都是以广阔的美国历史和犹太历史为其故事发生的背景，小说展现了深邃的主题和作者对于历史和文化对于人性的潜在影响的深刻并独到见解。

罗思进行小说创作已经有五十年之久。在漫长而且成功的文学生涯中，他所创作小说主题丰富多彩。然而，这其中也不乏连续性。例如，美国二十世纪四十年代至今的美国历史再现以及美国普通人所受到的历史的影响，一直是他小说中反复关注的问题。本文以罗思近 20 年创作的、被评论界普遍认为最出色的六部小说为研究对象，着重探讨罗思后期小说中的历史解读和自我再现，尤其强调第二次世界大战后美国犹太人所面临的生存困境，历史事件在一些小人物的命运和生活中所反映出的当代社会各种矛盾冲突，以及作者所运用的后现代文学话语。本论文试图全面考察这些作品的主题和创作特点，力图勾勒出罗思的真实面目及其艺术创作手法背后所潜隐的创作理念、文化信息和人文价值观。整个讨论紧紧围绕罗思作品对历史的再现和自我追寻的主题，从侧面审视当代美国历史文化发展的脉络，进而窥视美国社会性质，以及一个时代的种族、性别、文化等发展脉络。

身份建构是罗思笔下主要人物必须面对的困惑，他们大都没有一个和谐自我，内蕴自我分裂或自相矛盾。一个人的自我生成是个复杂过程，会同时拥有多种自我，并在社会中产生差异。罗思小说中的角色大都表现这类差异，即复杂的性格和人格多面性，具体体现在他们的身份建构上。即使同一个人物也出现多种身份。当代美国所呈现的复杂而令人迷惑的世态使美国犹太人失去了心智和情感满足的源泉，他们的自我追寻充满了失落。他们尝试放弃自己原有的种族身份，希望通过各种手段和方式去与所在国家的主流社会融合，结果却

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